

In 1861 Tsar Alexander II emancipated the serfs. The years before and after the Edict of Emancipation were times of extraordinary political activity in Russia. They saw the birth of a revolutionary movement drawing from both conservative and radical, both Slavophile and Westernizing sources, that repeatedly challenged the authority of Russia's rulers and insisted in one way or another on the primacy of the Russian people. Socialism, populism, and radicalism, once mere topics of intellectual discussion, became social forces of transforming power. To a very great extent, these were developments brought about by young people—not only students, but youthful teachers, activists, scholars, and intellectuals.

In a major study of this famous period, Abbott Gleason offers an important new interpretation of the genesis of Russian radicalism, and at the same time relates the 1860s to our own epoch. Stressing the relatedness of radical and reactionary doctrines, he explores the reasons why people held the ideas they did, and the psychology of this most remarkable of political generations.

"With every year that passes," Professor Gleason writes, "it becomes more difficult to regard the state that issued from the Revolution as even ambiguously 'progressive,' as that term used to be employed. This perspective, and the inevitable ironies that accompany it, are built into this book. . . . But the ambiguities of my attitude have certainly not diminished my admiration for the revolutionaries."

*(Continued on back flap)*

*Also by Abbott Gleason*

**European and Muscovite:  
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# YOUNG RUSSIA

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**The Genesis of  
Russian Radicalism  
in the 1860s**

**Abbott Gleason**



**THE VIKING PRESS NEW YORK**

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## Contents

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Introduction	ix
1. Russian Society on the Eve of Emancipation	1
2. Slavophiles and Populists	32
3. The New Era and Its Journalists: Herzen and Chernyshevsky	77
4. University Students in the New Era	114
5. The University of St. Petersburg	137
6. A New Left and a New Right	160
7. From Slavophilism to Populism: A. P. Shchapov	180
8. The Emergence of Populist Style: Pavel Ivanovich Iakushkin	226
9. Russian Jacobins	290
10. The First Shot	311
11. In Pursuit of Nечаев	337
Notes	393
Index	419

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# Introduction

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As will quickly become evident, the origins of this book lie in my experience of the American politics of recent years, both national and university. As I lived through the decade between 1964 and 1974 and at the same time tried to teach American students about nineteenth-century Russian radicalism, I became more and more confused by and dissatisfied with the secondary literature that I was reading myself and giving to my students. Taking full account of the enormous differences between Russian and American historical development, I couldn't but feel that there were strong historical parallels between Russia in the late 1850s and 1860s (when the revolutionary movement began) and my own historical time. Were we going to have an American radical Populism? The beginnings of an American revolutionary movement? For a time it seemed possible. In any case, a sense of the relatedness of the historical periods had been forced upon me, and I now looked at that stretch of Russian history very differently from the way I had approached it as a student in the 1950s —when “revolution” was sinister, out-of-date, romantic: something seen through the wrong end of a telescope. In the late 1960s, I wanted to bring my contemporary experience to bear on the Russian radicalism I was teaching and studying, but I wanted to avoid the pitfalls of easy and anachronistic analogy. This enterprise seemed to me a great challenge. Even before I was conscious of what I was working on, a book on “the radicalization of Russian society” (as I now thought of it) began to take shape in

my mind. I wanted to write about how socialism ceased to be something that intellectuals talked about in salons and became a social movement.

No treatment of the period 1855-70 satisfied me. As far as most Soviet historical literature was concerned, I was bothered by what I took to be a vulgar Marxist stress on the relationship between the economic substructure of society and its intellectual and cultural developments. That is to say, as I watched the radicalization of American society—in particular of American youth—and then its deradicalization, I became aware of how unrelated to major structural economic developments the entire process was. No doubt the affluence, the security, the loneliness of American liberal capitalism was in some way the “bottom line,” but that capitalism did not have to encounter major structural “contradictions” for there to be major political and cultural disorder. I therefore began to wonder about the relations between economic development and cultural crisis in my period; I became suspicious of the stress laid by Soviet historians (without much evidence) on the “breakdown” of feudalism—reflected, above all, in the Emancipation of the serfs—and the ceremonial entry of capitalism onto the historical stage as an “explanation” of what is generally referred to as the “revolutionary situation” of 1859-61.

Again, Soviet and some other Marxist historians tend to regard the ideas of prominent radicals like Alexander Herzen and Nikolai Chernyshevsky as in the last analysis a “reflection” of the historical situation of the Russian peasantry and its alleged attempt to liberate itself from serfdom and exploitation more generally.<sup>1</sup> As I watched the American Left struggle to develop a coherent view of itself and of the outside world, I was struck by how closed the process was in a way, how unrelated to what American working people believed they wanted. This radicalization seemed to be an affair of the intelligentsia itself, to use the term in the broadest possible way. The views of Tom Hayden did not strike me as a “reflection” of the views of any segment of the white working class; nor did Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* strike me as a “reflection” of the historical situation of black people,

although the fit here might be a little closer. And here again I focused these impressions on the radicalization of Russian intellectuals a century before.

I had many similar thoughts about American youth culture and the student movement in the late 1960s. How powerful it was, what messianic feelings it engendered, and yet how insubstantial it was! I began to think about the relationship of a vanguard minority to broader strata of opinion in a new way. I became conscious of the importance of radical iconography, style, and vocabulary, and of the confused yet hopeful way that people invest their inchoate aspirations in a set of “ideas” and in a movement. Nikolai Dobroliubov certainly cannot be described by any such imprecise cliché as “the Bob Dylan of his time,” but in class I was often tempted to do so.

Perhaps most of all, I felt that the secondary literature at my disposal could not give my students the sense of historical relatedness to the period that I was discovering and wanted to convey to them. Novels like Turgenev’s *Fathers and Children* helped, of course. But the real sense of the period that I wanted for them was to be had only by immersion in the memoir literature of the period, most of which was inaccessible to my students because most of it was untranslated. Even so distinguished and politically engaged a monument of historical scholarship as Franco Venturi’s *Roots of Revolution* often seemed remote, even dry, to my students, and this despite its powerful and detailed rendering of the heroism of many of the radicals about whom he wrote. At times, even I felt that Venturi, in his zeal not to diminish his subjects, accepted their own vision of themselves and their struggle more than was warranted. Somehow he also imposed on them a kind of uniform heroism that sometimes had the effect of creating a socialist pantheon and populating it with marble busts. To make what appears to be a rather harsh criticism is in no way to deny the fact that I and all my contemporaries are deeply in debt to Venturi’s book. With enormous erudition and skill he has mapped the terrain of Populism, and all scholars of my generation will be guided and influenced by his work.

Partially in reaction to the difficulties of teaching Venturi’s

book to my students, I have tried to give a more experiential dimension to my account of Russian radicals, to give my version of what things felt like. I fully recognize the subjectivity of such an attempt. What it *really* felt like to be radicalized in the University of St. Petersburg in the late 1850s is out of the reach of the historian. My version is grounded in what is at best a tantalizingly similar situation that took place—or continues to take place—a hundred years later in a very different culture.

To some readers, this book may seem in various ways reactionary—because it stresses the relatedness of radical and reactionary ideas, because I psychologize about ideas and why people hold them (rather than judging those ideas in some straightforward way on their merits as I perceive them), and because there is so much emphasis on the politics of style and fashion. I am in fact concerned that my own experience of student politics in the United States may have induced in me a certain pessimism and cynicism that will show up in this book in the form of “seeing through” the libertarian aspirations of Russian radicals. The Russian radicalism of that time *did* have a greatness and a heroism about it. Franco Venturi may have given it an element of hagiographic uniformity; Soviet historians constantly stress that heroism but feel constrained to remind the reader very often that the Populists did not “understand” the dialectic, the historical mission of the proletariat, and so on.

I am under no such constraints; indeed, outside the Soviet Union even Marxists seem no longer to believe that the proletariat, whatever that term may mean at present, has any historical mission. People choose their own missions, for one reason or another; the Russian intelligentsia, with enormous passion and persistence, chose for its mission the liberation of Russia.

Central to that mission, we can now see, was a revolt against that state power which played so disproportionate a role in Russian development. Both the Slavophiles and the Populists, and the whole circle of those who were touched by their ideas, saw the real values of Russia and Russian creativity not in the state or the forces that had disciplined and unified the country from above, but in society, in “the people.” Still, the countervailing

tradition was very powerful: in Russia you get things done from the top, by force. And within that radicalism whose wellsprings were so anarchist, there quickly developed more statist, centralist, power-centered currents. And gradually the statist tradition reasserted itself; the power of centralism became manifest. Populism and anarchism, Russians came to understand, were utopian. My book is also about a stage in *that* development. ←

Finally, I live in a time and in a place in which it is impossible not to regard the Russian Revolution as having failed in very basic ways. The private feelings of Soviet historians are no doubt various and complicated, but their published work must contribute to the celebration of that Revolution. Almost all Western European and American observers agree, however, that whatever the successes of Soviet power, the Russian Revolution has not realized the hopes of the nineteenth-century Left (including those centering on the problem of alienation) and do not seem likely to do so any time soon. With every year that passes, it becomes more difficult to regard the state that issued from the Revolution as even ambiguously "progressive," as that term used to be employed. This perspective, and the inevitable ironies that accompany it, are built into this book. Our unwelcome knowledge forces on us certain ironic attitudes toward the generous utopianism of Russian intellectuals then. There are other perspectives for students of these events, and there will be more; perhaps if they are unencumbered with "Western" liberal irony, they will better succeed in rendering the nobility and courage of the Populists.

It seems to me better to be explicit about my viewpoint. I want to derive what insights I can from it and explore it as far as I can. But the ambiguities of my attitude have certainly not diminished my admiration for the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia. Those Russian intellectuals remain, for me, about the most remarkable, many-sided, and congenial people whom I have heard or read about. Their story is still, for me, an inspirational story.

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